

Government is coming up with urgent deadlines with respect to the debt limit and beginning the appropriations process.

The full faith and credit of the United States cannot be in question. The last thing Americans need is for Washington to throw a big wrench in this red-hot economy that is creating historic levels of job opportunities and growing their take-home pay, and so faced with our Democratic colleagues' reluctance, the Trump administration took the high road. They did what needed to be done for our Armed Forces and veterans and negotiated a successful deal. In fact, compared to current law, the administration has secured a larger increase for defense spending than for nondefense. Let me say that again: a larger increase for defense than for nondefense compared to current law.

What is more, the administration successfully kept leftwing poison pills and policy riders far away from this agreement. We know some of the far left have been hankering to claw back the Hyde amendment protections or cut away at reprogramming authorities and flexibility that Presidents rightly possess. I applaud the fact that no leftwing riders like that were allowed into the deal.

This is the deal that was necessary to continue rebuilding our national defense after years of neglect, and it is the deal that was possible in divided government. I am proud to join President Trump in support of it, and I will be proud to support it when the Senate votes on the agreement before we adjourn at the end of this month.

NOMINATION OF MARK T. ESPER

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, in the meantime, this body has other significant business to complete for the American people. Most immediately, in just a few hours, we will be confirming a new Secretary of Defense. The vote to advance Dr. Mark Esper's nomination yesterday afternoon came in at 85 to 6. That is precisely the kind of overwhelming bipartisan vote that is called for in this circumstance.

The nominee is beyond qualified. His record of public service is beyond impressive. His commitment to serving our servicemembers is beyond obvious. The need for a Senate-confirmed Secretary of Defense is beyond urgent. I urge every one of my colleagues to vote to confirm our next Secretary of Defense later today.

9/11 VICTIM COMPENSATION FUND

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, that isn't the only important task we will tackle on a bipartisan basis today. In just a few hours, the Senate will attend to an important subject we have never failed to address; that is, the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund.

I know my colleagues don't need any extended lecture from me about the

solemn commitments this program represents: commitments to the firefighters, police officers, and all the first responders who rushed selflessly toward the World Trade Center just moments after the attacks began, to the first responders and workers who reported for duty days or even weeks later, putting their health at serious risk to help others, commitments to those who responded to the Pentagon and in Shanksville, PA, as well, and in the cases where injury or illness has already claimed the lives of those heroes, commitments to the surviving families.

Congress can never repay these men, women, and families for their sacrifices, but we can do a small part to make our heroes whole. That is why the Senate has never failed to attend to the fund before. We are not about to do so now.

I had the honor of meeting with a group of first responders and advocates several weeks back. They gave me the badge of Luis Alvarez, a New York Police Department bomb squad detective who was terminally ill and has since tragically passed away.

It was my honor to receive it. It was my honor to reiterate that the Senate's ironclad commitment to getting this done was never in doubt. I told the first responders I wanted the Senate to address this prior to the August recess, and today we will do so. It will be my honor later today to vote for the funding and ensure this fund is secure. I urge my colleagues to do the same.

HONG KONG

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, on one final matter, in recent weeks, I have spoken about our Nation's renewed competition with other great powers, like Russia and China. Despite decades of efforts to welcome these nations into a peaceful, prosperous, and fair international system, we are constantly reminded that these nations have their own design on the future. In their visions, foundational principles of sovereignty, freedom, human rights, and a rules-based international order tend to take a backseat to power politics and the pursuit of hegemony.

The Chinese Communist Party, for example, is working to extend its control and influence everywhere from Taiwan to Cambodia, to Laos, to Burma, to Hong Kong, as we have seen recently. The tools and tactics may differ but the goal is the same: Beijing wants to bend its neighbors to its will.

Earlier this month, after historic protests, Hong Kong's Government hit pause on legislation that would have further eroded its autonomy and invited more meddling from the mainland, but victory for freedom and autonomy is not yet assured. The bill in question has been suspended, but it hasn't been totally withdrawn.

Hong Kong's people, emboldened by this rare victory over Beijing's creeping influence, have continued to exer-

cise their freedom of assembly to reclaim the rights, privileges, and autonomy slowly sliced away in recent years by the PRC.

Protests continue and with them countervailing pressures from authorities beholden to Beijing. Increasingly brutal police tactics and pro-mainland vigilantes are drawing blood in an effort to intimidate Hongkongers back into submission.

Hong Kong's autonomous governance, political freedoms, and stable rule of law has been a crucial precondition of its tremendous growth and prosperity. U.S. firms have invested tens of billions in Hong Kong's economy because they trust the autonomous region's political climate, independent judicial system, and degree of independence from Beijing.

By contrast, international firms are currently pulling back from China due to concerns about corruption, autocracy, intellectual property rights violations, and state-sponsored corporate espionage.

At a time when China faces slowing growth, Beijing should seek to emulate Hong Kong, not engulf Hong Kong and remake it in the image of the Chinese Communist Party.

The PRC has long been working hard under the surface to increase its influence and power. In Hong Kong, like in so many other areas, China has used this approach that experts have called "hide and bide"—hiding their intentions and biding their time, slowly slicing away resistance, building leverage, and encroaching, one step at a time.

In the case of Hong Kong, Beijing and its agents have overreached, but they are recalculating—postponing action on this legislation while biding time to resume the encroachment.

This is not just a matter of the people of Hong Kong. The PRC's treatment of Hong Kong—just like its treatment of the Uighurs or Tibetans that Beijing claims as citizens—is an indicator of how Chinese rulers will behave abroad. All nations who trade with the PRC should be watching the drama unfolding on the streets of Hong Kong.

The world is watching and wondering: If a government cannot respect the basic rights of people it claims as its own citizens, why on Earth would it be trusted to respect the rights and interests of its neighbors, its trading partners, or the companies that invest in its economy?

As we all know, the people of Hong Kong have been carrying the banner for decades. I am proud to say that here in the United States, we have been marching alongside them the entire way. Back in 1992, I was proud to author the U.S.-Hong Kong Policy Act and helped codify America's stance on the special status of Hong Kong.

So on the 70th anniversary of the PRC and the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, I am grateful the administration and Congress, on a bipartisan basis, are reexamining America's relationship with